

Wilderness in the National Park System

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Issue

Congress chose to apply the Wilderness Act of 1964 to the National Park Service because the 1916 NPS Organic Act provides no clear guidance on the question of how wilderness in national parks should be managed and protected. While the Organic Act said that scenic, natural, and historic objects of the national parks are to be conserved while providing the public enjoyment by means that will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations, this was recognized as leaving the National Park Service with nearly complete discretion to choose among a variety of management options. The Wilderness Act supplements the National Park Service's basic statutory authority and requires it to manage wilderness lands for both the purposes of the park unit and the purposes of the Wilderness Act. (In Alaska, ANILCA provisions are additive.) This affirms the importance of keeping parts of parks in an undeveloped condition. With respect to administrative discretion available under the 1916 Organic Act, the Wilderness Act says permanent roads and commercial enterprises are not allowed in wilderness, except as specifically provided for, including those commercial services which are appropriate for realizing the recreational and other public purposes of the wilderness areas. Temporary roads, use of motor vehicles or equipment, landing of aircraft, mechanized equipment, and structures or installations are only allowed in wilderness if they are the minimum requirement for administering the area as wilderness or under certain provisions of ANILCA in Alaska. Public opinions on wilderness vary from the view of wilderness as unnecessary and overly restrictive in national parks, to essential for the long-term survival of these areas.

Policy

The National Park Service will manage wilderness areas for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such a manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. Management will include the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness. The public purpose of wilderness in the national parks includes the preservation of wilderness character and wilderness resources in an unimpaired condition, as well as for the purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, education, conservation, and historical use.

All management decisions affecting wilderness must be consistent with the minimum requirement concept. This concept is a documented process used to determine if administrative activities affecting wilderness resources or the visitor experience are necessary and how to minimize impacts while maximizing benefits to wilderness character and values. The minimum requirement concept will be applied as a two-step process that determines:

1. whether or not the proposed management action is appropriate or necessary for administration of the area as wilderness; and does not pose a significant impact to wilderness resource and character; and
2. the techniques and type of equipment needed to ensure that impact to wilderness resources and character is minimized.

Talking Points

- Congress has designated 46 national park wildernesses containing over 44 million acres (53 percent of NPS acreage). Another 39 areas within the National Park System have been recommended or proposed for wilderness designation.
- National Park wilderness areas tend to be larger in respect to their parent parks than are the wilderness areas found in national forests, wildlife refuges, or BLM areas. This is a further affirmation of how the public and Congress intend for these parks to be managed.
- In Congressional hearings on the Wilderness Act, Frank Church, the late Senator from Idaho, noted: "I can appreciate the interest of any agency in not surrendering their full administrative discretion over such areas . . . but that is what the Wilderness Act mandates the National Park Service to do We in the Congress recognized the pressures that would face the national parks

and provided, in the Wilderness Act, the statutory basis for strengthening the protective hand of the National Park Service.”

What the National Park Service Is Doing

- The National Park Service operates a multi-disciplinary National Wilderness Steering Committee to advise the directorate on wilderness issues that arise across the National Park System.
- In a unique arrangement, the National Park Service and the other wilderness management agencies cooperatively fund and manage the interagency Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute.
- The National Park Service participates in the Interagency Wilderness Policy Council to address multijurisdictional issues or problems across the National Wilderness Preservation System.
- Parks containing wilderness are required to engage in wilderness management planning to guide the preservation, management, and use of the wilderness area, and ensure that the area is unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. Wilderness parks are required to address the minimum administrative requirements for managing the areas as wilderness.
- The National Park Service is continuing to move toward completion of the wilderness review process mandated by the Wilderness Act, separate legislation, or policy.
- Park areas that are recommended or proposed for wilderness designation are managed to preserve their wilderness character and value, so as not to interfere with prerogatives of the Secretary, President, or Congress.

For more information

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